

Rochester Institute of Technology RIT Scholar Works

Theses

Thesis/Dissertation Collections

2009

Eating the allegory

Nicola Kountoupes

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Kountoupes, Nicola, "Eating the allegory" (2009). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.

EATING THE ALLEGORY

by

NICOLA KOUNTOUPES

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Willie Osterman, MFA, Professor, Chair of Committee

Jessica Lieberman, PhD, Professor, Committee Member

Alexander Miokovic, MFA, Professor, Committee Member

To Gus

Acknowledgements

This project was an immense undertaking. Thank you to my committee who not only believed in me, but also challenged me. To Willie Osterman, my chair, who challenged me to take it to the limit, while following my process with care. To Jessica Lieberman, for giving me great references and honest feedback. And to Alex Miokovich, a motivating yet calming factor during my entire process, who helped me simplify and hone my writing. Thank you all for your support, during what could be a trying time of artistic, intellectual growth for graduate students. Thank you to my fellow graduate students, who helped me to clarify ideas, challenged me, and whose friendship and support was also instrumental to my process. Thank you to Elliot Rubenstien and Patty Ambrogi, who early on, encouraged the culinary to come into my art. Thank you to my fellow graduate students who encouraged, challenged, and befriended me.

A special thanks to Chip Sheffield, whose genuine interest in my art, writing, and graduate school life was invaluable. To Kari Horowicz: I will always value our talks. You've been such a positive influence and source of information. Thank you to Will Wilson, for helping me with all things *Tile Pile* and truly inspiring me with your art. Thank you to George Bauer, who taught me the basics of laying tile, and made me laugh. Thank you to Dr. Samuel M. Paley, archaeologist and professor at the University of Buffalo. Our meetings and your generous advice were instrumental in making this project a success. Thank you to Cindy Ho, at S.A.F.E., who put me in touch with Sam.

Thank you to the RIT Grounds department, specifically Chris Furnare, who supplied me with the most essential means of production, from the bulldozer, to the

trailer, pumps, you name it. I could not have done *any* of this without your generosity and help. Thank you to Jim Yarrington, head of Facilities, who took time to show me how to implement my vision. To Ralph, Federico, Tom, and everyone at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, a good place. Thank you for providing a clean and friendly place to bake baklava, and hear some of the most incredible stories ever.

Thank you to my family and dear friends who helped me in the lead-up to and during the performance of *Eating the Allegory*: Jessica Marquez and Jeremy Dyer (Scientists), Annette Marchesseault and Petra Tunis (Archaeologists), Evelyn, Dina, and Carla Kountoupes, Toni Pepe, Samara Nasereddin, Maria Providencia de la Casanovas (Widows). Thank you to Stefan Petranek, William Wilson, and Aura Broidas, whose artistic eyes served to elevate the video documentation of the event to exceptional views. Thank you to Dina Kountoupes for helping me through the long haul of writing. To Carla Kountoupes, muse and sounding board for the project.

Thank you Lee and Judy Alderman, my surrogate family, and Martha Stivers, my honorary sister. To Lisa Farago, kindred spirit, for keeping up with my work and giving needed feedback. Thank you to my mother Evelyn, for your confidence and pride in me.

Finally, to the memory of Kevin Sterns, Chris Weingardt, Bill Wilson, and Susan Stivers, close friends and wonderful people all, who died while I was in graduate school at RIT. Though that time was so difficult, it helped me to keep things in perspective, and keep in mind what is really important. Thank you for nourishing my soul.

EATING THE ALLEGORY

By

NICOLA KOUNTOUPES

B.A., English, Kalamazoo College, 1991

M.F.A., Rochester Institute of Technology, 2009

ABSTRACT

This project explores imagery, sense memory, and performance through the intersection of an event and the objects within it and at its periphery. The archaeological dig provides the emotional and intellectual setting for discovery, history, and cultural identity, as well as an outlet for creation (of new memories) and desire (for knowledge). The performance elements of the show, including roles portrayed by audience and participants, provide the uncertain layout and improvisational aspect that relies on people coming together in a moment that is unique. The ephemeral nature of a moment lends itself to construction of memory, so that it will be somehow represented. This representational re-telling of the moment can take the form of oral, visual, or other sensorial traditions, such as food, in the case of this project, baklava. It can also be perpetuated through artifacts left in the wake of the moment, in this case, a large glass tile mosaic made from a photographic portrait, a construction trailer, and the documents, photos and other contents. These remains can be clues with potential, but may also lead to a stagnancy of investigation. The two strategies of constructing, preserving and transmitting memory, the *ritual* and the *archive*, are portrayed through the story of the archaeological excavation.

The conflation of object/icon with shared process/experience is at the heart of this project. The chaos of the day, with its varied moments and sensory cues, form a fleeting collection of divergent sources of memory and meaning.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Table of contents.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
Prologue.....	x
Summary of the Thesis show.....	xi
Introduction	1
Part I: Object-ness and Non-Object-ness.....	6
Code as recipe, Recipe as code, Ritual as archive	
Part II: De-locations.....	27
Excavation site as itinerant locale, Institution as itinerant locale	
Experiential Art as itinerant locale	
Conclusion.....	36
Epilogue.....	39
Selected Bibliography.....	40
<i>Appendix A</i> , Signage.....	42
<i>Appendix B</i> , Cheat sheets for archeologists, scientist, and widows.....	43
<i>Appendix C</i> , Support materials.....	45

::See appended dvd for video documentation of the show::

List of Figures

- fig 1:* Kountoupes, Nicola, *Carla*, 2006.
- fig 3:* Moore, John, Website: zeit.de/online/2007/43/bhutto-anschlag?from=24hNL
- fig 4-5:* Photographer unknown, *police mug shots*: L, Johnny Cash, TX 1965.
R, Amy Fisher, NY, 1997. Website: thesmokinggun.com
- fig 6:* Cangül, Caner, *Mosaic portrait of Maria Palaiologina*, 13th century, St. Chora Church, Istanbul, Turkey. Website: www.sacred-destinations.com/turkey/istanbul-kariye-chora-pictures/face-c-ccc-caner.jpg www.classicalmosaics.com/photo_album.htm.
- figs 7,8:* Kountoupes, N., Detail, Rochester Greek Orthodox Church, Nov., 2007.
- fig 9:* Warhol, Andy, *Liz* [Studio Type], 1963, silkscreen with silver paint on linen. Website: http://edu.warhol.org/aract_icons.html
- fig 10:* Screen shot, *TilePile* program, template opened.
- fig 11:* Kountoupes, N. Documentation of mosaic process, December, 2007.
- fig 12:* Kountoupes, N., Detail, Rochester Greek Orthodox Church, November, 2007.
- fig 13:* Kountoupes, N., Detail, Carla mosaic, June, 2008.
- fig 14:* Kountoupes, N., Detail, Baklava, October, 2006.
- fig 15:* Bauer, George, Nicola grouting the mosaic, January, 2007.
- fig 16:* Kountoupes, N., Cooking baklava in the Commercial Kitchen at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, Rochester, NY, March, 2008.
- fig17-19:* Kountoupes, N., Interiors shots of the trailer, March 29, 2008.
- fig 20:* Pelto, Gretel, from her documentation on March 29, 2008.

List of Figures, cont.

- figs 21,22:* Neshat, Shirin, Stills, *Passage*, 2001, in *La Ultima Palabra/The Last Word*, Exhibition Catalogue, pp 167, 171.
- fig 23-25:* Wilson, Will, from his documentation, March 29, 2008.
- fig 26:* Gorgoni, Gianfranco, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, plate #15, in *Earthworks and Beyond*, p 20.
- fig 27:* Goldsworthy, Andy, *Yellow Elm Leaves Laid over a Rock, Low Water* (October 15, 1991, Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire, Scotland), plate #51, in *Earthworks and Beyond*, p 53.
- fig 28:* Voltz, Wolfgang, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence*, plate #26, in *Earthworks and Beyond*, p 33.
- fig 29:* Kountoupes, Nicola, Detail, from documentation of *The Gates*, Central Park, NY, February, 2005.
- fig 30:* Kountoupes, Nicola.
- fig 31:* Exhibition view of Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (tomorrow is another day)*, 1996, in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, p 119.

Prologue

Eating the Allegory

A meal is prepared. Then it's devoured.
Delicious.
We'll never forget that dinner!

The moment is gone.
Did anyone take pictures?

How would you like your memory served?
Will it be in the archive? Or would you care for something in a ritual?
Either way, it won't be you in charge of it.

Thrown away, laid gently in a shrine.
Re-named, changed around.
Filed or framed.
Maybe to go unnoticed.

Who decides?
What is it worth?
We know these things are tied up with value.

But it's what's in between that's important.

Way before the circumscribed austerity of the archeological dig,
Back in the kitchen with my sisters that night, reading recipes, laughing.

- *N. Kountoupes*

Summary of Thesis Show

A construction project on the grounds of R.I.T.'s campus was postponed and repositioned when the site plan review found archeological artifacts. An archaeological team (Konstantinas Archaeology) was brought in, and situated itself on site with a construction trailer and a small team of scientists and archeologists. The dig revealed a large-scale glass tile mosaic of a woman's face (perhaps a famous person, god or icon?). It lay beneath layers of baklava, covering the mosaic like a layer of earth. The excavated site was marked to the specifications of archeological standards. Signage was posted to instruct and caution the general public as to rules of access and etiquette within the excavation site, along with 'pointers' on how to interact with the people whose land upon which the excavation was occurring. While the archeologists were in the pit unearthing the mosaic, widows dressed in black came into the site, and transferred the baklava unearthed by the archaeologists onto platters. They offered it to onlookers who gathered beyond roped-off boundaries that circumscribed the dig. The audience/on-lookers took the offering of the baklava and ate it, as per posted signage. People were invited into the construction trailer as well, to take coffee and watch the scientists as they compiled the archive, examined and catalogued findings from this excavation. The trailer was a depository of information, books, technology-the headquarters of the excavation. Visitors who entered the trailer were warned away from a closed door at the far end of the space by a posted "do not enter" sign. From behind this closed door, came the jovial sounds of a dinner party in progress. The trailer served as an itinerant artist's studio before the show, and the remnants of the artist's preparations for the show were compiled

amidst the archived remnants of the archeological dig, i.e., a dirtied apron hanging on the wall, soiled jeans from digging, various books and art supplies, artworks and studies of the image that was made into the mosaic intermingling with charts, graphs, maps, files, notations, site plan reviews, measuring devices...The trailer was a depository becoming an archive.

Introduction

Photographic space is disorienting because, never free of the impact of time, it exposes the past to the present in a way that at once illuminates and darkens each.

-Rosalyn Deutsche ¹

Memory is a construct contingent upon the passage of time. Privately or collectively, accidentally or intentionally, memory ties us to a past and connects us to a place or people. It can suddenly seize us, without a conscious provocation, or be invoked in an organized, calculated attempt to preserve the past. Memory is the manifestation of the desire to persist in the face of forgetting. It is a representation.

Allegory is defined as something that “says one thing and means another,”² challenging the idea of a singular interpretation. It is “a structure that lends itself to a secondary reading, or rather, one that becomes stronger when given a secondary meaning as well as a primary meaning.”³ Allegory preserves a memory through representation.

Eating the Allegory is a large-scale exploration of memory presented as an archaeological dig. The excavation is the event, to be documented and remembered, as well as the setting of the show, where stories are acted out and objects are displayed. A short distance away from the ritualized unearthing of the photo mosaic stands the archaeologists’ construction trailer, where the archive is being compiled, a construction of memory. The trailer is the counterpoint to the excavation, which is a mining of the past. The trailer and the dig showcase memories being tangibly cultivated from the past

¹ Deutsche, Rosalyn, “Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling,” in *James Welling: Abstract*, exhibition catalogue, p 19.

² Fletcher, Angus, *Allegory: The theory of a symbolic mode*, p 2.

³ Fletcher, p 7.

and preserved into the future, and through which I explore allegorical qualities of the archive and the ritual.

The archive and the ritual are two compelling strategies for sustaining memory prominently in my show, as conveyances of identity and culture. They are each steeped in tradition, highly organized and accessible through a particular etiquette. The archive is object-based while ritual is concerned with action. They are avenues through which the different narratives of the excavation are played out via the different viewpoints of the widows, archaeologists, as well as the audience. I present them this way in order to help illustrate that a memory can never be an entirely stable referent. It is a representation, referring to something beyond itself. Neither can the archive or ritual be entirely stable, as they are closed structures that must maintain some room for openness or accessibility, so that they will be maintained in the future. The ritual and the archive both accept and defy the passage of time in their strategies, and in this sense are ideal allegorical constructs.⁴

The archive represents memory as a collection of objects and documents. It can refer to the place where the collection is housed, a physical location where accesses the collection, or it can refer to the collection itself. This breakdown of the word's metonymy is significant in my project. The archive is where souvenirs of memory are compiled, dependent on the particular collection's parameters, ordered into a legible thread connecting the objects in the archive to the particular memory that archive is charged with preserving, be it an event, person, place, or other subject.

⁴ By sharing "a conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present," in Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: representation, power, and culture*, p 53.

Unlike the tomb-like stillness of the archive, the ritual is more vital in its dependence on activity. It is social conveyance of memory, learned from and re-enacted with others, privileging prescribed actions and objects that incorporate the sensual. Ritual preserves and galvanizes memory in a transitory experience that connects people in fellowship or communion. The ritualized memory is event-based, employing coded, ephemeral modes such as food, music, or body movement. Sometimes the ritual uses representational imagery, such as the photograph, to galvanize memory.

In *Eating the Allegory*, the photographic image has distinct roles within the archive and the ritual. In the form of the mosaic, it is at the literal and conceptual center of the show. It is the representative image in the story of the excavation, and well as a way to illustrate the allegorical nature of photography, the specifics of which shall be explored in greater detail later in this paper.

During the performance of *Eating the Allegory*, photographic images are archived by scientists while widows ritually serve baklava. Through these actions, the banal objects are elevated to codified signifiers of memory. This is how I illustrate the idea that food and photographs have a similar power to trigger memory, connecting us to a past through the senses. The family recipe, archived in the kitchen, provides the means to a particular taste, sparking a sense memory. The photograph, archived in family album, can trigger emotions by reminding us of someone we miss, or someone no longer with us. Once institutionalized in the lore of the ritual or the files of the archive, they become the important allegorical triggers particular to the memory being canonized.

The ritual and the archive are strategies of memory coded and accessed in prescribed ways. Often the codes and etiquette deter or challenge entry, and keeping the memory circumscribed. Allegory, on the other hand, is always inviting us to figure it out. It is a friendly challenge, inviting us to de-code. As Angus Fletcher notes in *Allegory: The theory of a symbolic mode*, “obscurity stirs curiosity; the reader wants to tear the veil aside.”⁵ In *Eating the Allegory*, the archive and the ritual are presented in an allegorical way; that is, their obscurity or illusiveness is an invitation to investigate. And we seek to decode them as we participate in their frameworks. We are in it, yet on the outside watching it, too.

In the quote that begins this paper,⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche reminds us that the revelatory nature of photography is always accompanied by the infuriating notion of something gone missing. As an allegorical construct, a photograph is readable, yet confounding in its representative power. It can be deconstructed, much like language. Craig Owens, in his essay on the allegorical impulse, discusses various constructs of allegory⁷. This discussion demarcates traits of allegory such as site-specificity, appropriation, impermanence, and accumulation. He demarcates these traits, easily attributable to most image-based representations, as allegorical tropes in that they beg for further investigation. My project explores allegory in terms of particular representations of memory, as well as processes that convey the idea that with every revelation, there is a loss, or perhaps a concealing of other components that might have contributed to meaning. *Eating the Allegory* brings to life certain tropes of allegory at the site of the

⁵ Fletcher, p 235.

⁶ Deutsche, Rosalyn, p 19.

⁷ Owens, p 58.

archaeological dig, at the same time drawing parallels between objects and processes as the story plays out and the allegory is dismantled.

When Susan Sontag describes the photographer as someone who “both loots and preserves, denounces and consecrates,”⁸ she could as well be speaking of the archaeologist, who like the photographer, is cultivating an allegory.

⁸ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, pgs 64,5.

Part I

Object-ness and Non-Object-ness

The allegorical nature of photography is illustrated throughout this project, the most prominent example being the photographic image of my sister Carla's face, translated from the digital, fragmented and reconstituted into a large glass mosaic at the center of the piece. Couched in the excavation site, the image is situated in terms of the ruin as found artifact. This setting relates the photographic image (replete with allegorical implications such as self-cancellation, fragmentation, and the multi-layered palimpsest) to a broader notion of burial and the transient condition of identity as it relates to photography.

The fragmented nature of the mosaic that impedes the understanding of the likeness of the face, unless seen from a distance connects to the idea that a photographic portrait can represent, but not truly reveal the person depicted. The denial of entry to the image is a condition of its construct: as you get closer to the mosaic, the image becomes less readable and more dispersed, until all that is visible are the individual tiles. The mosaic reduces the photographic image to its pixilated construct, essentially a digital dispersal of information. At the same time, the mosaic is constructed to be a permanent object, made from the most solid materials, to withstand the test of time. The image is elevated to monument, the most impermeable of material tributes. One could argue that photographic portraiture is a smaller-scale monument to a person, whereby the image of the person becomes an icon, especially within the realms of family.

Photos that are iconic within the family setting hold great interest for me. Surely, many of us can relate to having a particular image, a touchstone photograph that acquires a certain importance or fame within the lore of the family. There is a certain beauty combined with a power that particular photos carry which distinguish them as iconic, able to transcend time and connect us to a past. The genealogical physical traits, family resemblances, and stories that connect us to the person depicted, underscore the power of these photos to speak to identity. We recognize ourselves in the photo. I wanted to investigate this combination of recognition and admiration at play in the iconic family photo. This contemplation was the inspiration for making the portrait of my sister's face into the centerpiece image for the piece.

The photo of my sister Carla, from which the mosaic was made, is a straight-on image of her face. The purpose here was two-fold. One was to relay the intimacy of the photographic moment through the unflinching proximity of camera to subject. The other was to move the portrait beyond the realm of family by transcending the snapshot aesthetic. The picture of my sister transmits a beauty and simplicity that arches past photo document, into the ephemeral realm of the icon. There is no dimensionality, background or circumstance evidenced here. This photographic strategy is as alluring and frustrating



fig.1

as the image dispersed in tile mosaic. By ‘flattening’ her image in this shot, the physical features of the face, typically indicators of identity in a photograph, have become almost symbolic, and block us from identifying her beyond her basic likeness.

By flattening her likeness into one plane, I integrated the formal, descriptive elements recorded by the camera, such as her captivating expression, steady eyes, and geometric beauty of the face, with a stance invoking the language of iconic or religious imagery, reminiscent of icons familiar to me from my childhood, when I would visit my Greek Orthodox grandmother at her house in Detroit. Her house was decorated with religious images, and integrated into the array of the orthodox icons were the many school portraits of grandchildren or other collected correspondence from family. Her upright piano was an altar, adorned with memorabilia from her family and her religious faith.

The image of my sister's face goes from photo to icon to monument in this project. Her visage is elevated through the scale and site-specificity of the mosaic. The context of the image suggests that she could be a hero or god from an ancient past, to whose memory monuments were built. But she is my sister. I took this photo in a hotel room a couple years ago in Boston. She was pregnant, and I had just bought us matching jackets. It was winter.

The artifact-like, *object-ness* of the singular photographic image invokes a previously begun narrative or circumstance asking, 'what happened there?' The question becomes even more potent when less is known about a particular photo. The desire to connect to something we can't really know is a delightful and tragic tease leading into uncertainty with every investigation. There is a belief that this investigation is essentially impossible, and that a photo, though possessing a representational power, can only reside in the realm of death. The melancholic idea that the photo can only carry with it a sense

of loss and absence renders it a clue to nothingness. It isn't difficult to see how a photograph can represent the death of a moment, in that it can never return.

Christian Boltanski takes a step further when he attributes yet another death to photos that depict someone we don't know. Bihn Dahn paraphrased this sentiment as "first you die, then you die again when someone finds your picture, and they don't know who you are."⁹



*figs 2,3*¹⁰

The emotional impetus for this mosaic, indeed the entire project, stems from a simple fascination I have with photographic depictions of the face, as well as the possible stories surrounding found objects. The photo is a physical record of someone's visage. But it is also a referent to the immateriality of time, a placeholder, inciting a memory of someone through an entirely intangible process provoked by a tangible object. A single photograph is a rendition of something in the past, even though the articulated representation might be so realistic that it seems time-less.

Like other modes of two-dimensional visual art, photographic work can defy time by allowing us entrance into a contemplative zone of thought. But photography can link

⁹Dahn, Bihn. Artist lecturer at the 96th annual College Art Association Conference, Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, February 23, 2008.

¹⁰ L: Kountoupes, Nicola, Photo from my earlier series on filo-dough, *filography*, 2006.
R: Moore, John, web image of Benazir Bhutto flyer in Islamabad street, after attack, e-mailed to me by a friend, December 27, 2007.

the moment to circumstance in a particularly poignant way. There is a frustrating impossibility that a photograph aspires to, carrying the burdens of representation and misrepresentation simultaneously. The extractive nature of the photograph brings with it the undertow of the unknowable; a disconcerting side-effect endemic to this particular medium, because the photographic image has long been aligned with - and thus we long for- that which might be implied by the mechanical and objective accuracy that it seems to promise.

Eating the Allegory also speaks to the notion of *non-object-ness* in photography, which inherently misses something as it tries to capture it. Photography, though precise in scope, is fundamentally remiss in the ability to truly document. It disperses meaning as it tries to close in on it. Susan Sontag, in her work *On Photography*, discusses how photography can never contain the ephemeral moment, only serving to dissipate it, in the attempt to contain it. It's a fragmenting of the whole (experience), and the attempt to contain the ephemeral thing (time), in effect, negates the unique or ephemeral quality of a given event by reproducing it photographically.¹¹ This photographic "problem" of interpretation is brought to bear in the large reproduction of my sister's visage. This is a straightforward deconstruction of the image itself, illuminating and depending upon an implicit instability. But the image is further destabilized, beyond the mosaic, displayed repeatedly in different media, one example being the intaglio prints displayed in the construction trailer. There is no singular representation of the image. The different interpretations of Carla's face may strike us differently, thus the understanding of the image is never whole.

¹¹ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, p 191.

As mentioned earlier, the photographic portrait of the face has always been of interest to me. I appreciate the stirring, almost magical alchemy of likeness and document at play in visual representations of the face. There are different styles and conventions of rendering the face in photography. Some lean towards likeness, as portraits made in the tradition of painting, attempting to immortalize the subject. Some lean toward document, ostensibly “catching” the subject in a moment of time.

In the practice of photographic portraiture, the primary concern is to celebrate the subject. The person’s features and stance are illuminated in a romantic suspension of time in order to secure a memory. Another prominent photographic style that concerns the face is that of “official” documentation. This is the convention of passport photos and mug shots, which insists on a standard way of situating the face (frontal, profile) for official use. This tradition is concerned with identity in an entirely less romantic way than a *portrait* of the face. These images are so standard that they are anonymous in their universality, until scrutinized and singled out to validate an identity. Official photographs of the face, in their assertion of documenting the subject objectively, become concerned with context of private and public schematics of time. These pictures were momentarily plucked from the subject’s particular circumstance of travel, citizenship, or even life of crime. As such, I believe that the *document* of the face is concerned with mortality, while the *likeness* of the face is aligned with the immortal.



figs 4,5

Andy Warhol was an artist who leveraged the power of the reproduced and graphic image, elevating the unremarkable genre of the snapshot photo to iconic stature. He was a master at aligning the sacred with the profane. Perhaps some of his imagery was influenced by large amount of time he spent in church during his childhood. It stands to reason that he was familiar with powerful iconography on display in the Ukrainian Orthodox church. Typical of Byzantine imagery, saints were portrayed with no dimension (pre-Renaissance perspective), as simple, flat representations, looking straight out at the viewer. They are indicative but almost cartoon-like; recognizable, but not realistic. It can be argued that these church renditions in paint, glass, or mosaic, later



figs 6-8

informed the flat and iconic representations he created from Polaroid or photo-booth images of the celebrities of his time. Through his unique visual strategies, images he made of celebrities -whom he understood as contemporary deities or demigods, worshiped by populace, convey a sense of graphic simplicity and ubiquity, smacking of religious iconography; He was able to bring an ancient, iconic power of the image into the realm of pop.



fig.9

Code as recipe

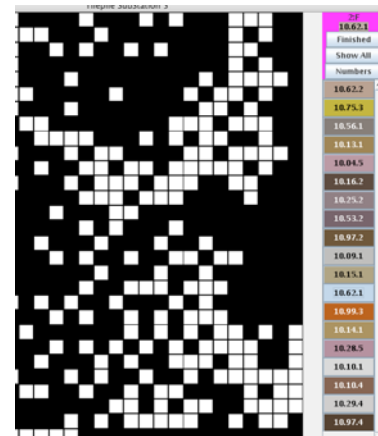
Constructing the mosaic, I used small tiles to refer to ancient Hellenistic or Byzantine styles of mosaics traditions. I wanted the image of my sister, extrapolated from digital information - ‘captured’ by a digital camera, recorded onto a compact flash card, then transferred to a computer - to be transformed from a digital “recipe,” or indicator, into a tangible form. Glass tile mosaics, lasting since ancient times, seemed to be a good strategy to represent this image: entrenching a fleeting moment in the life of my sister into a most permanent and preserved setting. But even in the solid state of the mosaic, the image is dislocated by the very construct that serves to embody it.

In the completed mosaic-image, we can see the digital (virtual) made material (concrete). The finished mosaic addresses fragmentation, not only in the collage-like element of the pieced together mosaic, but also in its pixel-to-tile ratio construct. Elements of digital and physical fragmentation are displayed in constant and equal abundance. The mosaic is essentially a large grid filled in with glass tiles measuring three-quarters-inch each. The forty-six thousand tiles that comprise the mosaic are a pixel to tile translation, determined from the number of pixels that make up the digital image, and how large the tiles are. A computer software program, called Tile Pile, determined these numbers. Essentially, the formula for the tile lay out is a “recipe” for the mosaic and the digital image of my sister, the tiles and construction materials comprise the “ingredients.” Unlike traditional mosaics, there is no originality to the way the tiles are made and inlaid. The only variable within the lay out of the mosaic is the

color of the tiles. The image is rendered visible via the *placement* of the different colored tiles within the overall grid. How large the tiles were and how many colors would comprise the palette of the mosaic were mathematically determined by the software program, according to my inputs.

Developed in 2004, *Tile Pile* was created by the muralist Josh Sarantitus with help from his brother, a software engineer, to convert images into large-scale tile murals. It is a share-ware computer program that is available online, at no cost, for anyone to utilize. *Tile Pile* mathematically converts a digital image into grid format using key information provided in the form of a *Photoshop* file (like RGB color information and pixel to tile ratios), along with preferences the user inputs, such as size and dimension.

Any image, converted into a *Photoshop* file, can be translated through *Tile Pile* into a mural or mosaic lay out code of any size and scale. The program dissects the finished mural into one-foot square sections. Each section has an information key corresponding to tile color and placement. This paring down of the grid into its smaller components helps to organize the layout and minimize confusion in the process. Its efficiency makes it ideal for public art projects, as the information for each grid section can be networked, so that people at different computer



monitors can work on different sections of the grid at the same time, fig.10
the software keeping track of the completed sections.

Sarantitus and Will Wilson, co-directors of the *Barrio Anita Mural Project*, used *Tile Pile* to integrate photography into the mural project they completed in 2005. The

project combines traditional mediums and narrative conventions of the urban mural, interweaving stories and images from Barrio Anita, the mural's location and Tucson, Arizona's oldest neighborhood. People from the community were able to participate in the creation of this public artwork, coming into the public open studio, an abandoned city fire-station, to help lay out tiles for the mural. It covers over 12,000 feet as is the largest public art project in Arizona state history.¹²



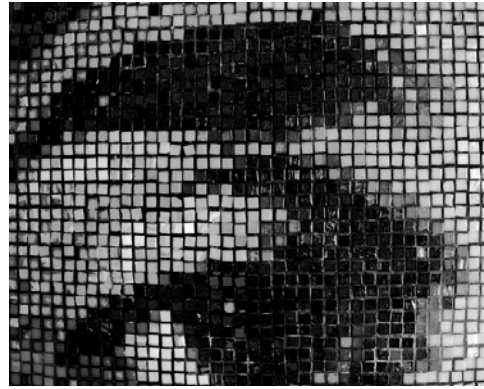
fig. 11

I used this technology to create a mosaic with much smaller tiles, appropriate to my own project. Previously, *Tile Pile* had only been used in the creation of murals with a larger sized tile, so this was first

time it had been implemented to create the ‘ancient temple floor’ effect I wanted to realize.

The digital grid that serves as the blueprint for the mosaic contrasts with the traditional way a mosaic is laid out. It is the *content* that dictates the manner in which the tiles are sized and positioned mosaics of antiquity. The portrayal of the depicted image determines the different patterns of tiles and spaces between them. Comparing a section of a mosaic made in the traditional method with a section of the mosaic from *Eating the Allegory* illustrates how differently they are constructed. With the color removed, we can see that though both are constructed by hand, the digital mosaic's grid doesn't refer to original variants in the handwork like that of the traditional..

¹² See appendix C- support materials.



figs. 12,13

When the mosaic was finished, the resulting object was everything I could have asked for aesthetically, but the process of building it was also beautiful. In the tradition of the open studio, I invited others to come in and work on different sections of the mosaic by my side. During the coldest months of the year, people ventured through snowy weather to my studio location, to have tea and “tile” with me. There was a warm and social aspect to this cooperation, a fellowship that reminded me of other process-oriented gatherings such as quilting-bees, solving jigsaw puzzles, or preparing food with friends or family for special meals.

Upon the completion of the tiling, I cemented and mortared the square foot sections of tile onto different sized sections of plywood, ranging from one by two, to four by four feet sections of the grid. These sections interlocked to form the final mosaic.

The finished mosaic is a moveable object, the completeness of which is dependent on its fragmented sections. It must be pieced together to be readable. The mosaic is itinerant through its positioning - before, within, and after the performance. Although its origins are digital in process, the mosaic is a material object, being ‘unearthed’ outdoors, on location. The physical object is itinerant, and the image it contains is itinerant.

The image is digital in origin, its source non-material. There is no object such as piece cellulose engraved in light to refer back to. In fact, there is no physical trace. When the digital engenders the material object, perhaps the question of physical origin becomes obsolete. Perhaps it is the resulting configuration of whatever finds itself propelled into the future that is important – or at least readable. In the fixed structure of the mosaic, entombed in the ground, the image finds itself reinforced, ready to re-locate itself in the future in material form. Pieced together with a solid material meant to stand up to the ravages time, the mosaic preserves the memory of the person depicted. Standing in stark contrast at the dig, is the baklava covering the mosaic. Like the soil it represents, it is dismantled and swept aside by the archaeologist who are digging to get to the relic of memory beneath it. But the widows passing it out to be eaten effectively appoint it a memory to be transported through ritual. It waits to be eaten, its object-ness is soon to be sacrificed to the action of the ritual. The baklava's object-ness is transient in this piece, but a carrier of memory none-the-less.

Recipe as code

Like a puzzle piece, the baklava fits in to the narrative of the show, a physical object that has its place in the performance. As mentioned above, it refers to layers of earth concealing the mosaic. As it is eaten and vanishes from the site, the physical layout of the piece is altered. The baklava transcends its object-ness in its temporality and through its adhesive power: it joins people through the sensory experience of *eating*, connecting the audience one step beyond the shared *spectacle* of the event.

The trajectory of the baklava during the performance of *Eating the Allegory* connects an illusive, imaginary past and present through sense memory. It also relates the excavation to allegory: from a fixture, or *object*, at the event (to its removal by the archeologists, then ushered to visitors by the widows, to being eaten) to a shared *memory of* the event. During this process the audience is not only a witness to the event, as the object is revealed, but also implicated in its demise by participating in the ritual that vanishes the object. Over the course of the day, as different layers are revealed, the space, as well as the show, is transformed.

The ephemeral nature of the baklava resides not only in having been eaten and thus changing the landscape of the piece. There is a potential energy *before* it's made: in the form of the recipe.

In order to know how to create this food, with its particular heritage and ingredients, a recipe must be translated. Cooking from a recipe is always a translation because the means by which the food was made (before the recipe was written down, then passed on), will always and only be an influence, a blue print or code, but never the same, because the context in which the food is made is always changing. This is both the frustration *and* the joy of cooking from a recipe. Recipes are the rearticulated versions of the old, re-formulated from instructions that were handed down by oral or written means, and held dear, perhaps in the family archive of the kitchen, to then be ritualized through preparing the food for particular occasions.

The recipe has a unique relationship with the food it represents. It lives between nostalgia and anticipation, describing something that was once there, and has potential to be there again, but isn't (yet). The melancholy of the fleeting experience begs for a

vehicle or context of memory. The recipe gives us one part of the vehicle of memory, but the enduring context is that of ritual. Because the food is created and consumed for a particular event, it is contingent upon the communal experience surrounding it, whether experienced for the first or one-hundredth time.



Baklava is a cultural links to my identity. As I am part Greek, I learned to make this special pastry from my aunt when I was young. My version of baklava is different from hers, but wouldn't exist if not for her. I am now known for this delicacy. I have refined my aunt Kiki's recipe into my own version, which I've given and sold to friends and family for many years. The baklava refers to who I am, as well as my cultural heritage.

When cut from the pan, the remaining layered sections of baklava remind me of small cross-sections of earth, its layers an indelible reminder of the passage of time. The paper-like nature of the dough itself is extremely vulnerable to conditions of time and temperature. It dries up quickly and crumbles apart easily. There is a distinct fragility to this pastry. Even when you eat it, some of it is displaced, breaking into papery crumbs, too small to be saved. The baklava and the filo-dough become symbolic, when they refer to archaeology, palimpsest, decomposition, layers; allegorical themes at work in this piece.

The objects being excavated in this show -the mosaic and the baklava, address permanence and impermanence, ritual and identity in complimentary ways. They each rely on a time-dependent and transformative process in their creation (the glass tiles baked in a kiln in Italy, the baklava cooked in an oven in New York), and the careful

piecing together of parts to make an eventual whole, learned from a lesson or code, and interpreted by or given to the person who crafts it. Both objects depend on traditions of skill and aesthetics in the history and process of their construction, implying a cultural, artesian heritage necessary for their formation.

Just as important, though, are the *differences* in the relationship of these objects. There is a distinct contrast in the lives of these objects and how they are integrated into our understanding and memory of them.

If the mosaic and the baklava are objects and carriers of narrative memory, connected to ritual, the construction trailer can be understood as the archive at the center of *Eating the Allegory*. It is the repository and passageway for interpretation, differences, and nostalgic possibilities at the dig.



The trailer is the headquarters for the archaeologists, where they bring their findings, do ‘scientific’ analysis, organizing and updating the collection. It is the start of a new kind of life for the found objects, orphans of the past, expatriated to the trailer, bound for yet another location, such as a library or museum, where they will be housed in perpetuity.

figs. 15, 16

The “Konstantinas Excavation Company” construction trailer is not only the headquarters for the archaeologists and repository for the findings in the story. It is the place the audience visits, where coffee and heat offer brief respite from the cold outside. People can observe the performance, but also socialize, drink and eat. The show and the reception overlap here. The trailer performs associative duties, providing an interactive element to the show, much like a haunted house at Halloween.

It is a place of activity and objects, in the spirit of the story/performance surrounding it, but always referring to itself in terms of techniques and strategies, so that the audience is situated in relation to the place and story, though not whole-heartedly immersed. The trailer is where other sensorial elements of the piece are made explicit. The smell of cloves emit from being crushed below the feet of the visitors to the trailer. The distant sounds of a dinner party come from beyond a door with a “DO NOT ENTER” sign posted on it.¹³ When there are only a few people inside, the sounds behind the door are audible. When the trailer is more crowded, the real socializing drowns out the other sounds.

As the objects in the trailer have the potential to be relics, they are also just part of the mess. A large version of the poem inspired by this project lays over a large intaglio print version of the image of Carla. Blueprints and site-plans, architectural landscape blueprints of RIT, almost every book I’d used in researching and making this thesis, art supplies and cooking utensils, all combine into a *living palimpsest* that smells like cloves and coffee.

The trailer echoes the fleeting nature of the entire event, where ‘scientific’ activities and documentation are situated alongside temporal elements whose depiction or presentation depend as much on time and *chance* as does the condition of the found objects, though in a much shorter time span. For example, the coffee urn that may or may not be tapped by guests over the course of the day or the pile of photos that may or may not have been perused by visitors, or the notes of dinner-party sounds coming from behind the door, which may or may not have been listened to, as well as the smell of

¹³ See Appendix A – signage.

cloves, which had been scattered on the floor of the trailer, to be crushed, or not, under the feet of those visiting.

As the excavation site is dismantled, the trailer becomes an allegorical site of creation *and* destruction, of possibility and death. It is the birthplace of the archive, and a tomb or crypt for the materials extricated from the site - at once discovered and laid to rest.

figs. 17-19



Ritual as Archive

The conflation of the object-ness of the archive (house of the relic/icon) with the action of ritual or *experience* is at the heart of this project. The chaos of the day, with its varied moments, objects and sensory-cues, mix together into a transient collection of divergent sources of memory and meaning. The exhibition is both very open and very closed in what it asks of us.

As various signs invite us into some spaces but keep us out of others, the emphasis on access is underscored with an implied hierarchy of the characters on site,

from the researchers in the trailer in their studied focus, to the widows on site who seem like ghosts, rather than hosts, as they offer baklava to the guests they never invited.

Ritual is accentuated through the widows' repetitive gestures at the site: they travel the same path keeping the same expressions. They hover between roles of hosts and servants as they accept the pieces of baklava from the dig site then offer them to the audience who stand beyond the boundaries. What is dug up then discarded by the archeologists is received, and treated with a stoic respect by the widows. Their gestures are marked by characteristics of ritual such as order, repetition, and tradition. In this sense, hierarchy is at much at play within the ritual as it is in the archeological endeavor, or the compilation of the archive. The code is different, though. The widows are on a different plane, and literally navigate between the boundaries circumscribed by the archaeologists and the site, affecting a difference in how the excavation is understood.

Their silent, inscrutable gestures imply a hierarchy that is beyond words or some sort of articulated instruction. The fact that they are the purveyors of the baklava, which vanishes during the course of the day, works with other indicators that symbolize transcendence of time. The widows become the keepers of memory and tradition.



The black outfits they wear refer to codes of dress traditional to many European, Mediterranean and Middle-eastern cultures where women whose husbands have died wear black for the rest of their lives. They carry on the memory of death in the symbolic color of death. They *themselves* can be read as off-limits

fig.20. But codified in this role, repressive though it may seem to

outsiders, is also the *power* of women to carry on tradition, nurturing the family, through

culture and food. As ritual is a way for memory to be codified into particular actions that stand up to time, they occupy a power that verges on transcending time.

The archaeologists and widows concern themselves with different strategies for preserving memory. It is through their actions that they strive for permanence, by preserving physical objects (in the archive) or certain actions (through ritual). These memories are integrated into institutions, be they physical (museum, archive), metaphorical (religion, tradition), private (family) or public (community), left for others to continue with, to be kept alive.

The work of Shirin Neshat (b. 1965) has always been concerned with frontiers, boundaries, and identity. The combination of visually stirring characters and spaces cultivate an almost mythic atmosphere in stark environs that are very provocative. Her second filmic trilogy, *Pulse, Possessed, and Passage*, commissioned by the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, was completed in 2001, pre - 9/11. *Passage*, the third film of the trilogy, is where I draw particular inspiration. Made in collaboration with Musician Phillip Glass, it culminates with mounting tension through primal sound and fluid camera work. The film visually folds imagery of procession and ritual into gender-based narratives, all within a desert landscape. As the camera pans in, what can only be described as a rhythmic, heaving mass of black comes clearer into view, revealing the mass as a group of women in black, huddled over a pit in the ground, digging into the earth with their bare hands, en mass. Glass's soundtrack of rhythmic breathing crescendos in tandem with Neshat's slow camera shot that zooms in on the incessant fury of a primal burial. The effect is quite intense, invoking a sense of a beating heart, or flowing blood- some force of nature- even childbirth. The stark and simple palette of the

piece create a primal yet organized display that allows one to contemplate big thematic questions of identity, origin and death.



figs 21,22

Although naturalistic elements of earth, sky and fire have starring visual roles in this work, there is no identifiably specific location or time in this piece. It is itinerant, outside the realm of site specificity. The bleak and anonymous physical location and the measured processional actions conspire to elevate the narrative of the piece into something special, ritualistic, even sacred. But we are in a dislocated place, where viewer and protagonists are situated peripherally, and where the physical landscape of the movie is elemental yet unknowable. Neshat cultivates spaces of ritual and contemplation in order to transgress their frontiers. In this sense, her work succeeds in “transcending boundaries of an imaginative geography”¹⁴

The visual and conceptual influence of boundaries and access that Neshat employs can be seen in *Eating the Allegory*. I use boundaries to help shape the idea of access in a number of ways. There are the physical boundaries of roped-off areas, barriers of language between the widows and archaeologists, and posted signs on site instructing visitors in different behaviors and points of entry. They force a perspective,

¹⁴ Neshat, Shirin, *La Ultima Palabra/The Last Word*, exhibition catalogue pp 31, 67.

preventing the viewer from a full immersion into the situation, yet allow for an exploration of some sort. A sense of longing (to join in or know more) is cultivated by being denied access. My hope is that this longing can give way to an understanding that there are limits to connecting and knowing, so that even in cooperation, sharing, or in contemplation within a group, there may never be true communion.

Part II

De-Locations



...The canonical center may, indeed, be most interesting for its elusiveness, most compelling as an enigma of authority.

-Homi Bhabha¹⁵

fig 23

Excavation site as itinerant locale

The structure of the piece depends on Western conventions of cultural identification and scientific exploration. The system of “discovery” at play at the excavation site depends on a format of hierarchy, a context doctrinal in structure. At the same time, *Eating the Allegory* gives no explanation to where things are from, or to claim what their essence is. Instead, it contemplates the search for a “center,” the impulse to understand the essence of something unknowable, be it origin, beauty or identity.

Much of the preparation of the physical excavation area, including the performances of the characters on site, were patterned from research I did on traditions and expectations surrounding the field of archaeology, including acquiring an understanding of landscape architecture, and institutional planning, design and construction. I also paid attention to mainstream American media and popular-cultural portrayals of these institutions, many of them iconic or stereotypical in their depiction,

¹⁵ Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*, p xi.

and notably privileging an elevated position of the investigator over that/those being investigated.

I considered Hollywood films' portrayals of 'the scientific team,' as well as news articles about people connected to a specific piece of land and what befalls them when outside experts or specialists descend upon their realm. I thought about the relationships that people native to the land have had with the itinerant experts or explorers, archaeologists or anthropologists, who (with whatever good intentions) become invaders of culture. To consider the movies of Trin Min Ha, a filmmaker who takes on the empiricism of established schools of thought by dislocating the conventional viewpoint of anthropological filmmaking, makes for an interesting and potentially dramatic conflation of expectations and outcomes, when butted up against conventional Western portrayals of mythic invaders cultivated by Steven Spielberg or George Lucas.

The two most opposing viewpoints performed in *Eating the Allegory* are those of



the subjects and the objects at the dig. The authoritative (subject) vantage point is of the explorer (archeologists, scientists). Their narrative is a search for origins (the object, the mosaic). The search can take on archetypal overtones that depend on where narrative sympathies lie. It is here that the widows are



figs. 24,25 vulnerable to being objectified by the archaeologists and by extension, the audience, as they have no outward language to tell their side of the story. As archetypes, the archeologists can be seen as saviors or invaders, depending on the narrative. Not to say there are only two ways to look at this scenario (intruder and

native). In fact, my goal here was to dilute and conflagrate narratives by way of many different depictions of attitude and visual imagery, so that an awareness of something playing out, but not quite right (expected, or realistic) could be depicted in the scenario of the archaeological excavation.

Institution as itinerant locale

As the site of performance, the archaeological excavation is concerned with a physical space. In considering how I would stage *Eating the Allegory*, the area to be excavated and amount of people expected to gather were best suited to an outdoor location. In keeping with the narrative, the dig was to be located on the property of R.I.T., and thus the physical location became dependent upon ephemeral relationships with and within the institute. In order to meet approvals, acquire the construction equipment, the people-power and permits to pull off the big show and earthwork (not to mention supporting my presence on site as I prepared the show), many agencies of the institute were involved.

There were proposals, agreements and many meetings that took place in regards to the planning and outcome of the show. Different relationships, documents, political discussions were cultivated. In this sense, the location of the work was lifted into a public realm of ideas, allowing for the idea of the institution itself to become the site of the artwork.

The project wasn't relegated to the physical grounds of R.I.T. It spilled into the theoretical space or meta-locale of institutional event – its planning, and process. The

show was entrenched in procedure and people from the institution: my professors, the planning, design and construction department, grounds and building maintenance, the hotel school, campus safety, the president of RIT, campus police, as well as many of the students. The site of an institutional setting grounded the work, and influenced how the art was made and exhibited.¹⁶

The project's scope went beyond RIT, as I sought out people and agencies in the city of Rochester for service and support of this piece. I did all of my baking in a commercial kitchen in one of the city's shelters, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. I was able to trade food I made there for the use of their kitchen and donate my time to some of their services. A motley crew of friends, family and local service companies - ranging from O'Connell Electric Company, to masons, landscape architects and tent rental companies - came into the fold.

Experiential Art as itinerant locale

Artists who work in the public realm and with the land take on the issue of site-specificity, not only in terms of a physical location beyond the art gallery, but because the work enters that non physical location: arena of public opinion. The most prescient example of working in this realm is the dynamic team of Christo and Jean Claude (b. 1935), who spend years, even decades, planning and organizing the on-site installations that finally enter the public sphere, or at least the public view.

¹⁶ See Appendix C – support material.

After they've chosen the location of their project, they must engage themselves in the daunting task of introducing themselves to and convincing the people concerned with the area where their project would be realized. Often this means years of proposals, contentious or political relationships, documentation, and public meeting with the local government. In this sense, they are ultimate itinerant artists. They come to a location, make their mark and move on. Jean Claude and Christo's sense of the monumental or even the trace of the man-made inscribed into a natural setting or landscape is quite different from earthworks made by artists like Robert Smithson (1938-1973) or Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956).



figs 26,27

Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah) is dependent in large part upon a sense of how the work will stand up to the test of time: physically, how it will last or change in its location, and how it will be interpreted or received beyond its original installation. Goldsworthy's outdoor work such as *Yellow Elm Leaves Laid over a Rock, Low Water* (October 15, 1991, Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire, Scotland) depends on fleeting cycles of nature and landscape, which allow for a staging area and brief apex period or ideal time to see the art he's constructed on location, before the elements reclaim or subsume it. The photos he takes are not about the process or life of the art object, but a document of the art object in its finished form. Unless one is physically on site with him to watch him creating his outdoor installation work (or unless the artwork is

made from a more permanent material, like stone, which some are), the photo is the only way to see this fleeting thing of beauty, because it's so vulnerable in nature. Wet leaves dry up and blow away, the water carries the materials with it, etc. So although his work is both sculptural and resides in the natural landscape, in no way is there an intension to defy time through the creation of the art on location.

Unlike other itinerant artists concerned with art in outdoor or public spaces, Jean Claude and Christo's work is meant to be experienced as a public event. Not just simply in terms of a performance, but as an action and an outdoor display dependent on a public community particular to that spectacle, bringing the event into the multilayered realm of the carnivalesque, especially as the events are so temporary. Temporal exhibits like *Running Fence* (1972-76, 14 days) or *The Gates* (1979-2005, 23 miles, 16 days) are great examples of the style of creation they've mastered. A grandiose object or setting is created, but then just as quickly dismantled, with only memories and documentation left in its wake. So even though there has been much ado about coming into the particular space, there is the accompanying anticipation of its end because it won't be up for long. Maybe two weeks.



figs. 28,29



Taking influence and inspiration from Jean Claude and Christo, I want my work to be object *and* location based, with the temporal sense that an event evokes. The grand

archeological dig was important, but I also drew from the more mundane event of a shared meal in conveying the ephemeral. The meal is prepared, presented, and then consumed. The object becomes secondary to the event. The object is still of great value, having been lovingly prepared by artist or cook, but the event allows for the *experience* of the object, from which point memory takes over.

The other important element in the site-specificity of my work is chance. How many might come, what the weather might do, as well as how people may interact with the space and show, are all aspects that can be prepared for, but ultimately are outside the control of the artist. That is precisely where I derive pleasure from the work: the space is prepared and fussed over, then left to the audience and participants to do what they will, in a scheduled timeframe, allowing for a truly rich performance piece.



March 30th, 2008¹⁷

Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961) is also interested in the *experience* of certain processes. His artistic endeavor is located within an event. But unlike Jean Claude and Christo, his work is concerned primarily with the cultivation of an experience. His work

¹⁷ The day after the show, grounds dept. plowed over the site.

is performative, set forth in planning and purpose. But boundaries between audience, viewer, participant and artist become blurred. He succeeds in de-constructing and re-constructing the realms of the art space through this strategy. People come together in a shared experience, however disorganized, and a great deal is left to chance.

Often Tiravanija's experiential kind of art takes place around the meal. The cooking process becomes the center and criteria of the experience, and depends on variables not only in culinary terms - such as ingredients and preparation of the food, but also in *who* partakes in the endeavor. The artistic experience is centered on a shared process, not a fixed object. Its not unusual for Tiravanija to have the term "lots of people," cited in the lists of materials for his pieces.



fig. 31

His influence can be seen in *Eating the Allegory* in my emphasis on *process*. As I stated earlier, the construction of the mosaic, completed in a setting where people would help me (laying the tiles into their taped matrixes, while we drank tea and chatted), would sometimes take on a quiet, social tone reminiscent of a quilting bee, or other communal craft. The excavation site was a social location, a place where people gathered to eat baklava and drink coffee as they moved about the exhibit. Process and shared experience were of great importance to the show, and to the portrayal of allegory in terms of ritual, which was propped up next to the less active- but just as transitory- portrayal of the archive.

Tiravanija strives to create situations that he hopes challenge social and cultural biases through the *communal nature of a shared experience*. He asks a big question in

his work: “how is it possible to surpass our limitations to openness and be able to experience the idea of “otherness” without certain limitations and judgments?”¹⁸

In his *Untitled (tomorrow is another day)*, 1996, people were invited to partake in the preparation and eating of a meal. The intention of the piece was not just to involve people in a process of cooking and eating together, but to transcend the meal with discussion and interactions that might further the simple act of socializing, outside of typical ritualistic and cultural settings. Cooking becomes an avenue to a process-driven experience that makes space for community, while resisting traditionally ritualistic signifiers in its immediacy and open-endedness. Communication becomes an important part of meal-based projects, in that when people gather, dialogue inevitably develops through the cultivation of the event, a non-ritual experience.

¹⁸ Interview with Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, p 176.

Conclusion

Like most other humans, I am hungry.

-M.F.K. Fisher¹⁹

In this paper, I draw parallels between cooking from a recipe and the compiling of an archive from ‘discovered’ objects. In my show, I animate these conveyances of memory through time in the on-site performance. The creations of the meal and the archive are entirely dependent upon an understanding of the past. Both create something anew, from a particular background that will nourish others (literally or intellectually). The self-consciousness of legacy is alive in both endeavors.

Whether it revolves around the kitchen table, or a theoretical idea, *sharing* is the elemental source of community. Exploring how we connect to each other lies at the emotional heart of my project. If sharing derives from a desire to connect, I believe that the desire to connect stems from instinct to nurture, as well as a need to understand one another. In other words, outside of the rational realm of communication, we connect to each other through a sense of communion.

A shared experience is one in which understanding beyond language is possible. This is why the memory of a wonderful dinner with friends or loved-ones is so indelible. The senses contribute a significant interpretive layer to memory. As a moment recedes into the past, the feelings associated with that event can be triggered much later in time,

¹⁹ From “The Gastronomical Me,” reprinted in *The Art of Eating*, p 353.

simply by the taste or smell of something related to that event. In this way, sense memory can be a link to community and identity.

As much as a taste or smell can transport us to a long forgotten feeling or memory, the photograph, as in the case of the portrait, also has the power to transport us. Moving from object-ness to non-object-ness, food and photographs are tokens that become *methods* by which we (long to) connect, and through which we are transported beyond our immediate circumstance. They are everyday ways in which we connect to something bigger than ourselves, be it the memory of others, a sense of love, or even a sense of identity. But there will always be the wistful sense of separation. For even in fellowship with others we are alone, as individuals and as perceivers of the world. When we gather together to eat the same meal, if it is true that “no two of us taste the same plum,”²⁰ then perhaps the *desire* to commune will be what sustains us.

The desire to connect and the missed attempt at communion help to fuel my artistic quandary in the project of *Eating the Allegory*. When elements combine in the form of an event or representational object, the endeavor to remember becomes an attempt at some type of joining, to experience something together on physical, intellectual, or emotional grounds.

I believe that most art evokes a sense of desire or longing, but it is the allegorical ability of postmodern art in particular, in its disarray and displacement of influences and desires, to touch upon complex worlds, worlds that depend on each other, but that are not necessarily on the surface, or even in the same visual language. I believe that true postmodern art is not simply a pastiche of styles or ideas in representational language. It

²⁰ Ackerman, Diane, *A History of the Senses*, p 141.

is a complex and multi-layered, multi-narrative *allegory*. It does not only beg questions of origin or meaning. It begs the questions of possibility. Allegory looks both to the past and the future to be interpreted. And it succeeds in making a place for questions, some of which have not yet been introduced.

Eating the Allegory seeks to address threads of longing and the strategies employed to overcome, or at least overcompensate for, our own mortality by exhibiting and performing allegorical forms of memory through the vehicles of the archive and the ritual. Like literature, the exhibit is highly narrative, but strives to make longing, loss, and desire palpable beyond the literate, and in many layers. From a fleeting sense memory to a codified ritual, through family or community, privately or publicly, we seek to live on. From the little cue of sense memory to the lofty implications of the monument, from the profane to the sublime, we want to live on.

Epilogue

The past is hidden outside the realm, in some material object..., which we do not suspect.

-Marcel Proust

I leave you with this quote from *Swann's Way*. It beautifully represents the theme of the desire to connect through time. And lest we forget: Marcel Proust's entire masterpiece is launched the instance that the narrator bites into a petite madeleine, recovering (discovering?) the memories he perhaps would never have accessed had it not been for that cookie:

...There is much to be said for the Celtic belief that souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognized their voices the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.

*And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vein to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.*²¹

²¹Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*, p 42.

Selected Bibliography

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Random House, 1990.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge Press, 1994.

Baas, Jacquelynn and Jacob, Mary Jane, eds. *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*.
London: University of California Press, 2004.

Beardsley, John. *Earthworks and Beyond: contemporary art in the landscape*, 4th ed.
New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2006.

Benjamin, Walter. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in
Illuminations. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Deutsche, Rosalind. "Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling," in *James Welling: Abstract*. Edited by Piet Coessens and Loretta Yarlow. Brussels and Toronto: 2002.

Fisher, M.F.K. "The Gastronomical Me" in *The Art of Eating*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.

Neshat, Shirin. *La Ultima Palabra/The Last Word*. Curated by Octavio Zaya. Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Castilla y Leon(MUSAC). Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2005.

Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in
Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture. Edited by Scott Bryson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

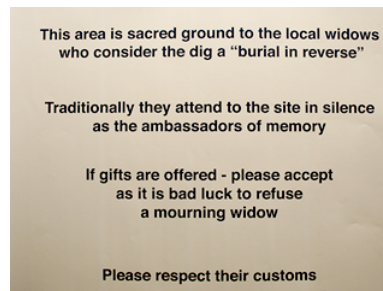
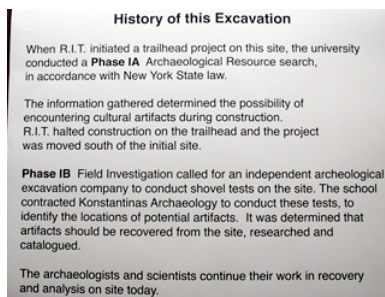
Selected Bibliography, continued

Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff. London: Penguin Books, 1922.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Doubleday, 1973.

Appendix A: Signage

Signs that were on location,
in the trailer, and in the field



Appendix B:

Cheat sheet for Scientists and Archeologists

Interaction with the audience:

Should be minimal, you're on the job and pretty interested in what you're doing. The onlookers remind you that what you're doing is important. There should be a slight smugness in your demeanor because of this. If people ask you I trust you to be in "character" as much as you'd like, but here is a list of catch all answers that might be helpful, when people ask you things. I like the idea of minimal talking, cause you're shy, nerdy, or too engrossed in work. I like those characterizations for this situation. List of ideas for plausible answers as follows:

"That information is classified. I'm sorry I can't discuss it."

"We are still looking into that and we do have some theories."

"You'll have to ask the head archeologist about that."

"we're not sure. We still have carbon dating to do on some of it."

"one moment please.....(big pause).....yes how can I help you"

If they ask who the mosaic/photo is of:

"We are still looking into that and we do have some theories."

We know this image comes up a lot, and we're researching those leads. We're really not sure who she is, if she was a public figure, a model for an artist, a religious saint, a famous person. It's been said she is a "real" person, and some people claim they can trace their family roots to her, but we don't know if that is folklore or if it is documented somewhere. Most of this culture's history is an Oral History...for now, it's still a mystery and she's become a kind of muse as we search for answers"

There are recipes in the trailer, and certain books that pertain to memory, food, desire and the photographic image. Also allegory is important, specifically the Craig Owens piece on Allegory (toward a theory of postmodernism, and the ideas of layers, history, and unreadable layers of history, fragments, and the ruin all pertain. You will probably be familiar with some of the literature in there, and can refer people to them.

Interaction with the Widows:

You want their affection, but really can't do anything about the fact that you're an outsider. You twist between humility and imperialistic entitlement and that's an unsolvable place from which you come. You bring things to them that they might not understand or want, but you feel you have sovereignty

For your eyes-only: Overall, this project is involved in the allegorical ways in which we construct memory. This circumstance collides the artifact with the event; the ephemeral sense memory with the tangible object referent. Don't tell those nosy bastards that part. Also please tell people to help themselves to coffee.

Please ask me all the time anything you want or can. Always bother me.
And know how much I appreciate you being here sharing this day and helping me.

Thank you for your collaboration! -Nicola

Appendix B, cont:

Cheat sheet for widows:

Interaction with audience:

Silence is golden. Averting the eyes while offering up the baklava.

Try not to engage with the audience beyond the required interaction. If you feel like interaction is appropriate and need something to say, I like the idea of you offering it and saying “give....Give baklava” instead of “take baklava.” But no talking is best. I like the idea of them not knowing what the deal is, why you’re not talking and if you even speak English...I like that uncertainty.

Character background: this is a duty that you’re carrying out, and these are strange people as far as you’re concerned. Any other character development or “acting” that you’d like to try is up to you.

Interaction with the Archeologists:

I picture this as a more solemn interaction, but maybe a little resentful that they are there and you have to work with them. Although I can also picture some widows being very humble and gracious in their dealings with these outsiders...kinda thankful for their help, while others are suspicious and solemn.

What to do with the baklava:

You’ll have trays. And napkins. You’ll be stepping out of the trench and giving to the audience. There will be a table to put the baklava on, so that if your trays aren’t emptied, you can put the pieces on the table, and continue to gather b’va from the archeologists.

Pacing of this event will be organic, I suppose.

I also expect to have two paths of widow traffic, so there is a bit of a choreographed flow. Nothing strident.

I have extra tights and headscarves for you. I also have much much much gratitude. Thank you so much for helping me and contributing your precious time and beautiful faces to this performance.

Sincerely,
Nicola

Appendix C: Support Material

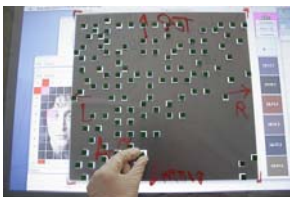
Barrio Anita mural, Tucson, AZ, completed with the *Tile Pile* program.



© Hozhographos Studio, Barrio Anita Mural Project

more information available at
<http://www.hzgstudio.org/MuralProjects/MuralProjectsHome.html>

Some steps from the mosaic process



Appendix C: Support Material, cont.

Safety Proposal Letter:

September 13, 2007

Mr. Chris Denninger:

I am seeking the approval from Public Safety for my MFA thesis show, a temporary outdoor art installation on RIT's campus, on display from October through December, 2007. The installation will take place under the continuing advice and guidance of Campus Facilities Management. I have been working closely with Jim Yarrington and the Campus Aesthetics Committee review board to ensure the project's feasibility, keeping in mind all safety and campus guidelines.

The project is a fake archeological excavation site, to be located off of Andrews Drive, within viewable distance, but with no access to the site where actual construction on the trail will be (see attached map). The real construction project at the trail is scheduled to take place within the same time frame as my thesis project time-line. The display of this thesis project is dependent upon the simultaneous activity of that construction. It is the visual backdrop to the installation.

The proposed site surrounds a 10 square meter area of mostly exposed topsoil, with a 6x9 foot mosaic being revealed in stages, as the site is documented with a few archeological props, including: a roped off area for the dig grid, a small ramped construction trailer, from which I will photograph the construction of this display, and keep my supplies, maps and documents, and an outdoor generator-lighting unit. These are the only props that will be on site, and will not move as I work on the mosaic. The other important element is the ongoing work of the official RIT construction, within a viewable distance from the area of my installation. This is not only the visual backdrop to the show, but it's also the back drop for the story of this project: ground was broken to begin construction, and when this mosaic was found as the ground was cleared, construction was halted, and was re-established nearby, while archeologists and historians came in to assess and excavate. No one will be permitted to walk into the project site, where only the artist will work to reveal this mosaic during the opening performance on November 10th. There will be absolutely no access to the trail construction site or perimeter, which will be clearly marked with signage, fencing and marked barricades.

It's with the support of the Director of Campus Planning and Design & Construction Services, and the Coordinator of the MFA Graduate Program at the College of Imaging Arts that I seek your endorsement for this MFA Thesis show. Please contact me with any questions or concerns. Phone: 585-303-0832.

Sincerely,

Nicola Kountoupes,
MFA candidate, RIT CIAS

Appendix C: Support Material, cont.

Endorsement Letter from MFA Chair:

Letter of endorsement

I'm pleased to write this letter of endorsement for the project proposed by Nicola Kountoupes, for the completion of the Master of Fine Arts degree through the school of Photographic Arts and Sciences. This is the terminal project for the degree, after completion of all required studies, teaching, and further approval from her thesis committee, all professors here in the college of imaging arts and sciences or fine arts at RIT.

This project is special in that it is not a typical gallery display. The show will take place outside, in conjunction with elements outside of the CIAS, implementing the landscape and weather-conditions of the campus of RIT in November. The thesis show is a temporary outdoor installation taking the form of an archeological discovery being excavated on location at RIT. The project will be installed during the month of October, ready for exhibition the following month. She will be working outside, piecing together the final display, a mosaic which will be revealed for an audience on site at the Thesis Opening, scheduled for November 10th, 2007. Of particular interest is The performative nature of this show, and the involvement and cooperation of different populations outside her immediate surroundings within the college. People are encouraged to be spectators and visit the site as she works to install the piece, as the process is a part of the display as it is readied. She has been working with Jim Yarrington, director of Planning, Design and Construction at Facilities at RIT, in order to find the most appropriate and safe location for this endeavor. She is also working with other professionals and scholars in the field of Archeology, Landscape Architecture, History and Art.

The scope of the project goals and timeline is well within the realms of safety, scholarly interest, and artistic integrity. After following Nicola's progress in her efforts, I am happy to endorse the production of this unique thesis show.

Therese Mulligan, PhD
Chair of the MFA program
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Photos from the site:



Appendix C: Support Material, cont.

Photos from the site:



© Google Earth.